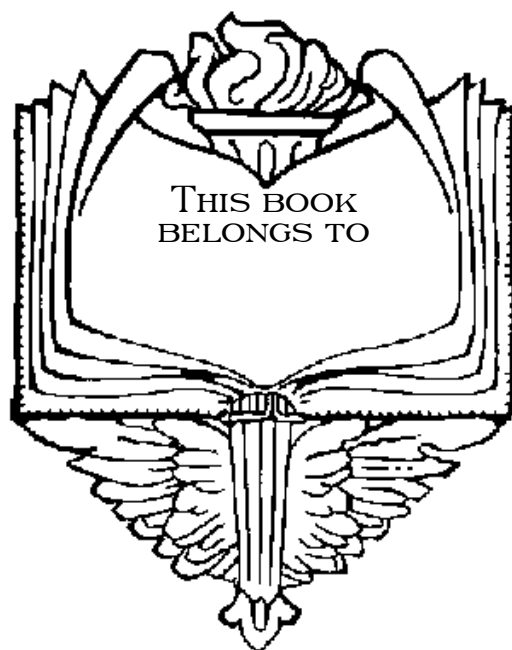




LOST IN THE FOREST

by Charles W. Henson



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To the real Hope. May she always find her way.



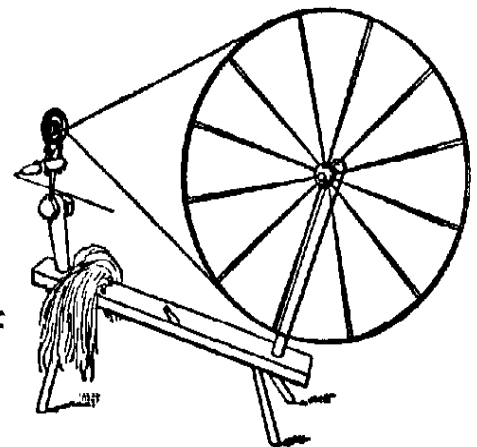
This is the story of a little girl named Hope, who lived with her mother in a cottage on the edge of a deep and dark forest. The forest was ancient and hoary with moss, and no one, not even the woodsmen who trekked into it to harvest the firewood which earned them a living, knew its full extent.





he forest had no name; people just referred to it as The Forest, when they referred to it at all. The wealthier folk lived in town several miles from the woods' edge, in neat and well-kept houses with carefully-trimmed lawns, surrounded by a few pruned and domesticated trees. The poorer people lived on the fringe of The Forest, in isolated cottages huddled beneath the boughs of the great trees. They raised sheep for wool, or kept small vegetable gardens, or gathered the mushrooms that grew in the woods. All of these things they sold in the town market every Saturday, using the pennies they earned to buy the things they could not make or grow themselves.

Hope's mother kept a half dozen fine, fat sheep. She spun their wool into thread, and wove the thread into cloth. From the cloth she made clothes for herself



and for Hope, and what was left over, they sold in the market. The sheep were well cared for and gave exceedingly fine wool, and Hope's mother was a skilled spinner and weaver, so the rich people of the town were anxious to buy all that she could make.

Hope was very good at finding mushrooms, and she could tell the difference between those that were good to eat and those that were not in an instant. She



had a knack for spotting morels, which are the same color as the brown leaves on the forest floor, and therefore very difficult to see. Morels are the tastiest of all the mushrooms, and those that Hope and her

mother did not eat brought a very good price in the market.

What with the money from the woolen cloth and the mushrooms, and the vegetables from their garden,

and the firewood they could gather near their cottage, Hope and her mother were comfortable and cozy in their little home near The Forest. There was only one danger to ever cast a shadow over their lives, and that was connected with the Forest Road.

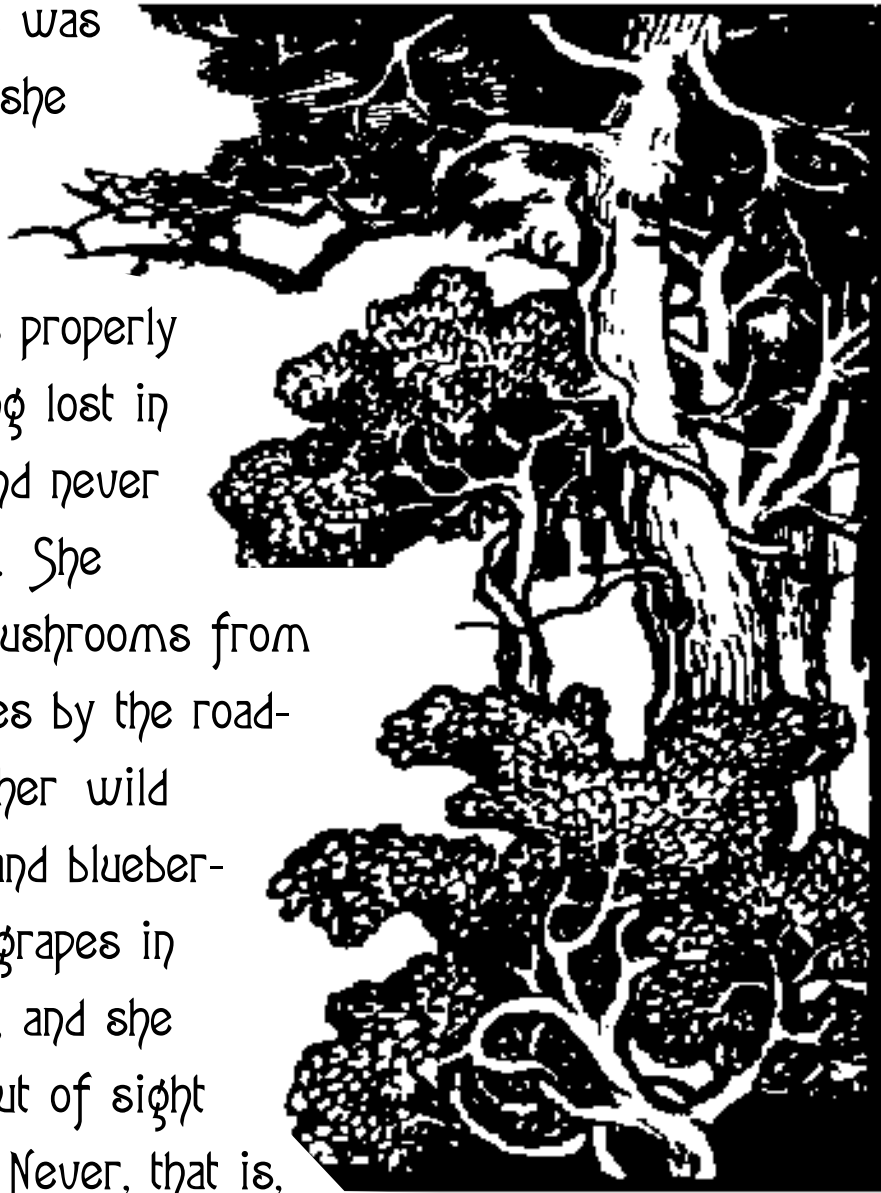




Hope's cottage was beside an ancient road. In one direction the road led to The Town, and that's the way Hope and her mother took every Saturday when they went to market. In the other direction, the road led into The Forest. Hope often went just a little way in that direction when she was hunting mushrooms, but she never went out of sight of her house. Many a time her mother would caution her never, ever to leave the road.

"The Forest is treacherous, Hope. If you step off the road you may never find it again. It's dark under the boughs, and sometimes the trees shift about. You might be only a stone's throw from the road and still not be able to see it. Never leave the road, no matter what." Her mother would go on, sometimes at length, to tell and retell all of the stories she had ever heard of folks who had gone into The Forest never to return. These stories almost always ended with the words, "...and they were never seen by anyone, ever again."

Although Hope was not sure that she believed all of the stories, she was properly afraid of being lost in The Forest, and never left the road. She would pick mushrooms from under the trees by the roadside, and gather wild blackberries and blueberries and fox grapes in their seasons, and she never went out of sight of her home. Never, that is, until one fine afternoon in early May.





The sky was brilliant blue and the sun was shining as Hope set out with her gathering-basket, looking for mushrooms and maybe a few wild strawberries. As she walked down the Forest Road, she could spot clumps of jack-in-the-pulpits and maypops and wakerobins in the woods on either side. Robins and mocking birds and blue jays were singing in the trees, or gathering snips of grass for their nests. A lovely breeze was rustling the leaves and her hair, and she could smell the scent of wild rose and honeysuckle and grape blossoms on it.

Hope was enjoying the sights and sounds and scents so much that before she knew it she had walked farther down the road than ever before. Stopping, she looked back the way she had come and could no longer see her house. The road



had narrowed a bit, looking more like a well-traveled cart track than a road, but it was still clear and obviously the road, so Hope was not particularly worried. There were no forks in the road, so there was no chance of her becoming lost. To go home, all she had to do was follow the road back to her door. It was such a splendid day, and the flowers were so beautiful that Hope decided to walk just a little farther and see what was around the next bend.

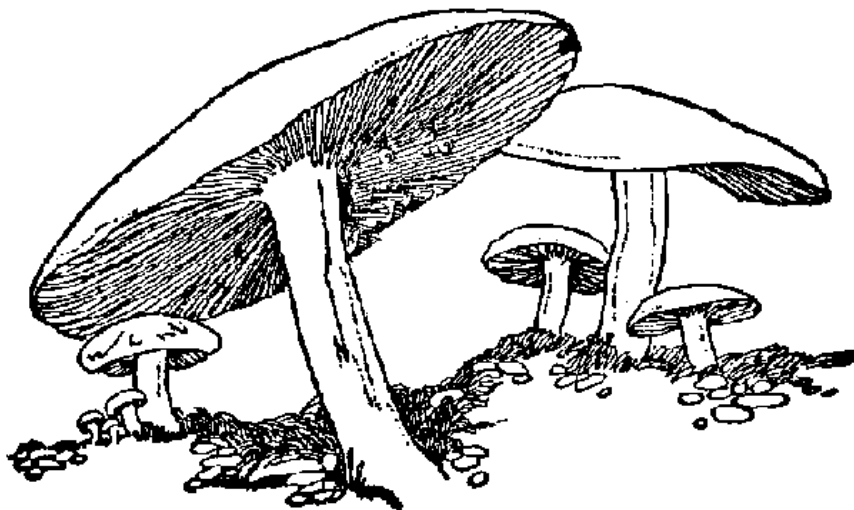


Around the next bend was a spectacular clump of golden ragwort. Caught in the sunlight, the yellow blossoms blazed like gold. As Hope was admiring the flowers, her gaze was drawn to a clump of morels in The Forest, just a few feet beyond. Without a second thought she stepped around the ragwort and off the road. As she bent to pick the mushrooms, she looked back toward the road. She could still see its dusty line, just



beyond the golden ragwort, although the flowers did not look nearly so bright from this side. Their heads were all turned toward the sun, and away from The Forest.

Hope looked around to see if she had gotten all of the morels before returning to the road, and was pleasantly surprised to see two more just a few feet deeper in the woods. These were even larger than the first, and would sell for more than usual in the market, but she hesitated to go any farther from the road. Still, she knew in which direction it lay, and the yellow flowers would guide her back. Not without misgivings, Hope stepped toward the morels. As soon as she stooped to pick them, she spotted another clump

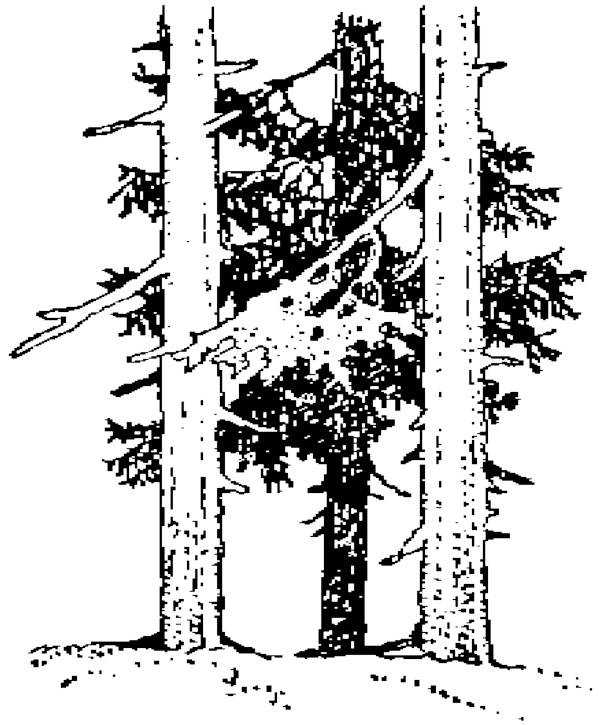


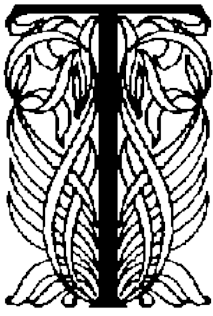
of even larger ones near a huge tree just ahead. Being careful to keep in mind the direction back to the road, Hope happily filled her gathering basket with the biggest morels she had ever found.

Her basket was mounded when she finally retraced her steps back toward the road. She had gone, she thought, far enough to be able to see the golden ragwort, but all she could see were more trees. Hope began to feel a little panicky, but she took a few deep breaths and thought about her situation. "Probably," she said to herself, "I went a little farther than I thought. After all, I stopped to pick mushrooms three or four times, and I was so happy to find such big ones that I must not have realized how far I went. Anyway, I know this is the right direction, so all I have to do is keep walking and I'm bound to come to the Forest Road."

So Hope continued to walk. And walk. And walk. Long after she realized that she must be walking in the wrong direction, she continued to walk. And as she

walked, she kept hearing her mother's voice, saying, "...and they were never seen by anyone, ever again." Occasionally, Hope would turn to her right or to her left, hoping that she would cross the road. She knew if she could only find it, she would be able to follow it back to her own door. As she walked, she imagined how easy it would have been had she only heeded her mother's advice and not left the road in the first place. Even if she had picked only the first clump of morels, she would have been able to return to the road and would be home now, helping her mother to make them into a delicious mushroom soup.



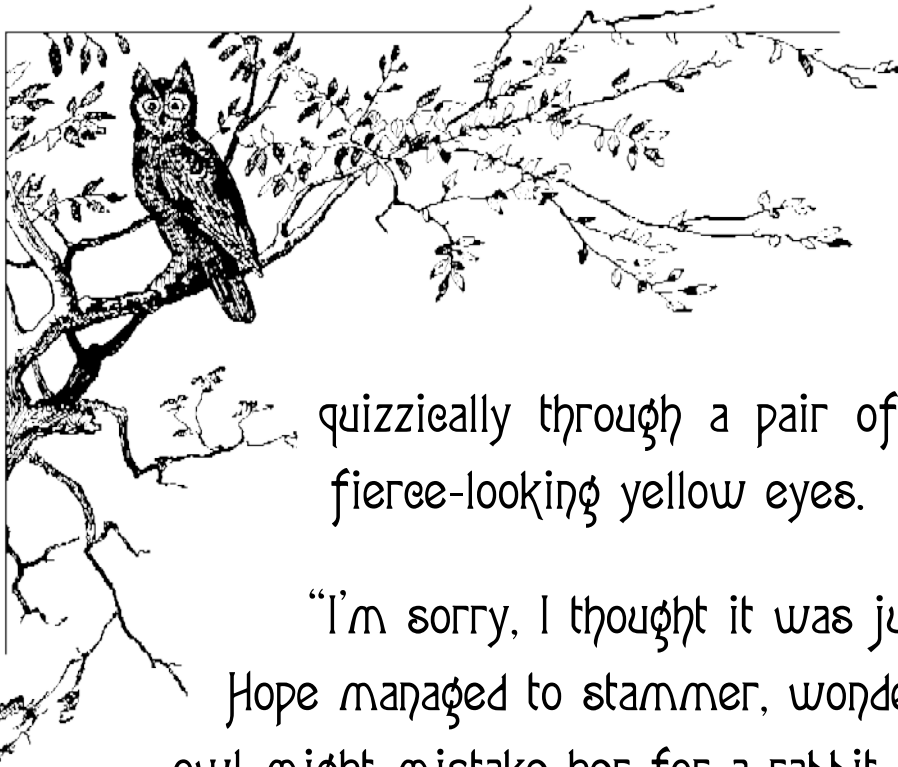


hinking about what she should have done and wondering what she was going to do was beginning to make her head hurt. Despairing, Hope sank down on a mound of soft green moss and leaned back against the smooth silvery bark of a gigantic beech tree. Although she couldn't see the sun through the dense branches, the little girl knew that the afternoon was passing and that it would soon begin to get dark. The woods were stuffy and soundless, and the pale green leaves of the beech seemed to droop without even a puff of breeze to stir them. Hope was beginning to feel weighted down by the silence and gloom of the forest, when a low and mournful voice coming from just above her head made her jump to her feet!

“Whooo are yooou, leaning against my home?”

Perched on a branch above where she had been sitting was a large brown owl, peering at her





quizzically through a pair of rather fierce-looking yellow eyes.

“I’m sorry, I thought it was just a tree,” Hope managed to stammer, wondering if the owl might mistake her for a rabbit or a mouse, and try to carry her to his dinner table. Now she could see the big hole higher up on the side of the tree, which was the owl’s front door.

“Just...a...tree?” harrumphed the owl, ruffling his feathers and puffing out his speckled chest. “This tree happens to be my home, my ancestral home to be precise. My family has lived here for time out of mind. You are standing upon the threshold of Owlwood, and you—by the way, who are you, anyway?”

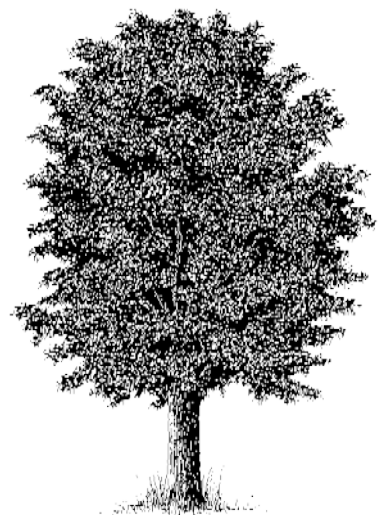
“My name is Hope,” replied the girl, beginning to

feel less frightened and even a little amused by the blustering bird. “I didn’t mean to imply that your home is not magnificent and beautiful, as indeed it is. It’s just that I was startled. You see, I was looking for mushrooms and I got lost, and now I can’t find my own home. My mother will be terribly worried.”

“Can’t find your home? How can that be?” asked the owl. “Surely you could recognize it by its shape or its color.”

Hope looked puzzled. “But I can’t see it from here. I don’t know how far I’ve walked, and the trees are too thick to see very far in this forest.”

“Nonsense,” replied the owl. “All you have to do is fly up into the air and then begin making ever-widening circles in the sky.” He waved his wing in the air. “That’s how I do it. The light green beech leaves of Owlwood are easy to spot



among the oaks and hickories around it. The trick is not to fly too high, so you get above the clouds. Just maintain a comfortable altitude, and..."

"But I can't fly," interrupted Hope.

"Well, now, that is a problem, and no mistake. Can't fly? Just what kind of bird are you, anyway?" asked the owl, squinting down at the girl.

"I'm not a bird at all," replied Hope. "I'm a person."

"A person!" cried the owl, opening his wide yellow eyes even wider. "A human being? Well, there's your problem! People don't live in The Forest. They build odd little nests out near the edge of the woods. Never in here, among the great trees. You're looking in the wrong place. What you need to do is take the Forest Road out to The Edge. Likely you'll find your nest—er, house—out near there. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have

to be going. It's nearly supper time, and I have certain responsibilities,

you know." And with that the owl spread his wings and



flew off into the gathering dusk.

“But where is the Forest Road? That’s what I’m trying to find. Wait! Come back, please!” Hope called after the bird, but he was already out of sight above the dense canopy of branches.





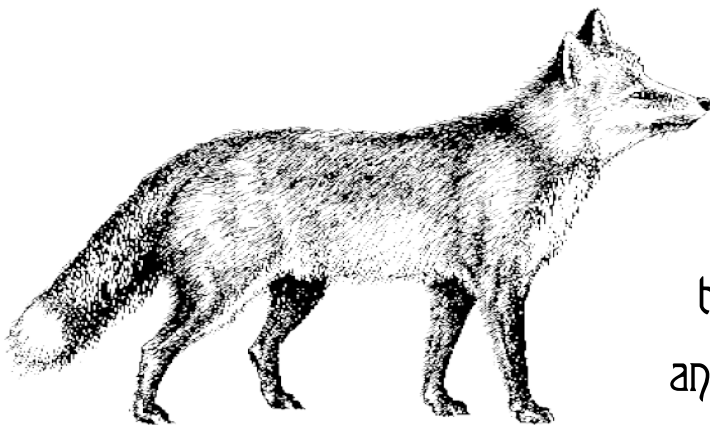
Feeling more alone than ever, she began once again to walk through the trees in the direction she thought the owl had gone. "Maybe he flies over the road, looking for mice or rabbits," she thought. But before very long she began to lose heart again. The shadows were deepening and it was hard to see very far in the gloom. Even if she passed very close to the road, Hope realized that she would probably not see it. Once more she remembered the words, "...and they were never seen by anyone, ever again," and she began to be really afraid.

She had come to a small hill, no more than a mound, really, and she climbed to the top and sat down. Hope drew her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms



around her legs. Shivering a little, she closed her eyes and tried to decide what to do next. She had drifted half to sleep when she was brought back sharply by a high, loud bark. Her eyes snapped open, and there, sitting in front of her at the base of the mound, she saw a rather irritated-looking red fox.

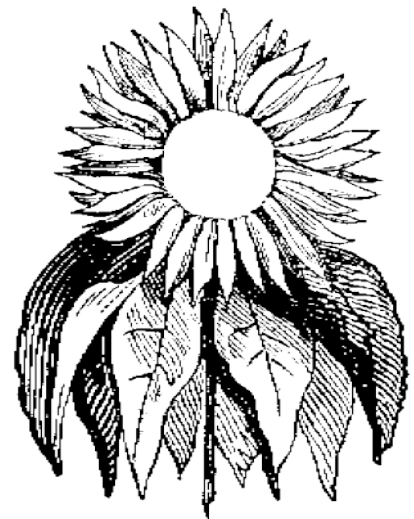
“If you’ll pardon my stating the obvious,” said the fox, “the roof of my house is really not the appropriate place for you to take a nap. I mean, what you do in your own home is entirely your affair, but I’m sure you’ll agree that visitors should mind their manners. Speaking of which, I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced. My name is Renard, and I am the master of Raposa, on which you are currently reposing. I hope you appreciate alliteration.” Slyly smiling, the fox eyed the girl expectantly.



Hope was fully awake now, if a little confused by Renard’s chattering. “My name is Hope, and I do apologize if I’ve

shown any disrespect for your magnificent home.” She wisely refrained from mentioning that she had mistaken Raposa for a hill of dirt. “It’s just that I’m lost and I’ve been wandering in The Forest all day, trying to find my own home. I was very tired, and now it’s almost dark, and I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she ended miserably.

“My dear,” said Renard, dropping his bantering tone and looking truly concerned, “I had no idea. Tell me, is there something the matter with your nose? I mean, it’s rather small, but do you have a cold?”



“My nose?” asked Hope. She had been on the verge of weeping, but the fox’s changed manner and curious question made her forget her problems for a moment. “There’s nothing wrong with my nose, and I never thought it was particularly small. What does my nose have to do with finding my way home?”

The fox gave her a curious look. "I don't see how you could expect to find your way home or anywhere else without your nose. Certainly, if you were close enough to see it...but otherwise, how else but by scent could you find your way around? Why, without my nose, I'd be wandering around lost forever, even if I were within a quarter-hour's trot of Raposa. But with the right scent...well, I don't mean to brag, but after just this one meeting with you, I'll be able to recognize your den in an instant. I'll be able to



follow your scent through The Forest and repay your visit. And I will, too, but right now I have to go out and get dinner. I hear my pups yelling for it. Children are so impatient, don't you agree? I'll be by in a few days, and we can continue this most interesting conversation then. Do be careful with that nose." The last sentence Renard called over his shoulder as he trotted off between

the trees, his bushy tail disappearing rapidly in the gloom.

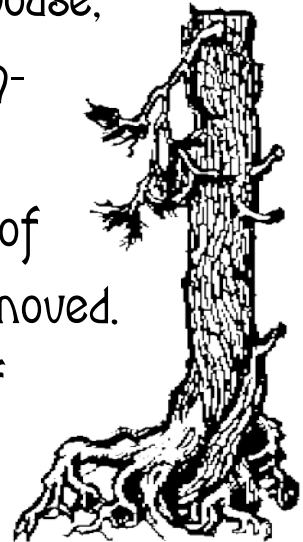
“But I can’t smell like a fox,” called Hope after the little animal. “Won’t you lead me home, or at least back to the road?” Alas, it was too late. The forest animals move swiftly, and the fox was already out of earshot, concentrating on getting supper for his family.

Hope considered waiting at Raposa until Renard returned, but she was afraid the fox might be gone all night, and she didn’t know if he would be willing to leave his family long enough to lead her out of The Forest. She had her doubts as to whether she could convince him of how desperate her position was. Renard was a bit too flighty to carry on a serious conversation. So, even though it was now completely dark, Hope once again began to slowly walk through the forest.

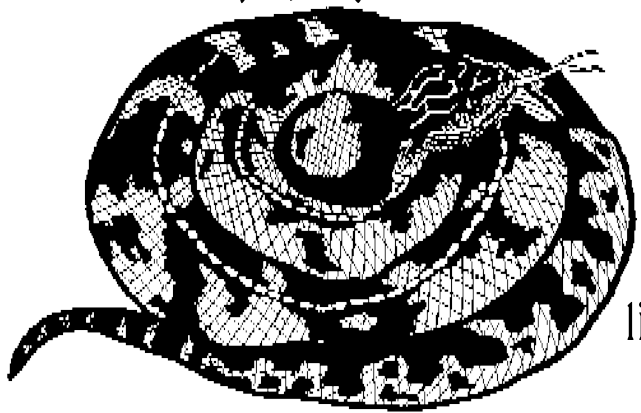




oonlight and starlight filtered through the leaves and gave her just enough light to keep from bumping into trees, but she was constantly being swatted by branches, and walking into spider webs that she couldn't see, and stumbling over rocks. Hope was just about to give up and curl herself into a ball again when she spotted a brighter area just ahead. Thinking she had finally found the Forest Road, she began to walk as fast as the trees would let her. The bright area grew more and more distinct until suddenly, she stepped out into a clearing. She found herself standing in a grassy area the size of a house, with a single giant tree stump in the center. Looking around dully, Hope gradually realized that the clearing was the result of one gigantic tree being cut down and removed. The Forest closed in all around her, as if straining to fill in the opening.

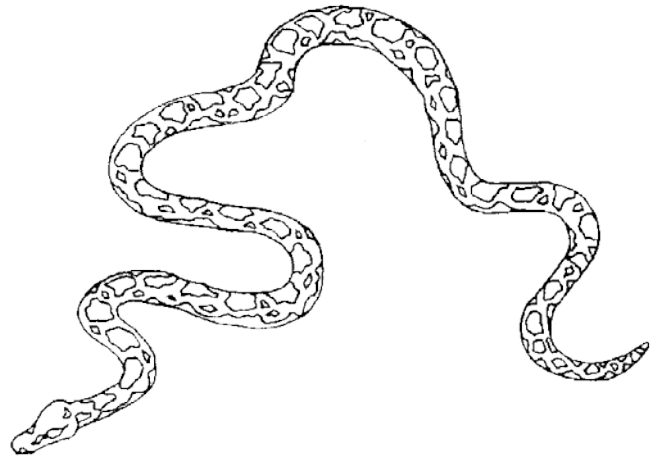


Exhausted and disappointed, Hope climbed onto the stump and thought about the tree that had been cut down. She rubbed her hands across the top of the stump and felt the ridges left by the saw. The woodsmen must have cut down the tree. It was gone, so they must have taken it away to saw it into lumber to sell in the town. That meant the road couldn't be too far away, but which way? It was just as Renard had said: she might be no more than a stone's throw from the road, but there was no way to tell. She considered trying a direction and, if she didn't come to the road in a reasonable length of time, she could come back to the clearing and try another. But she was afraid. What if she couldn't find the clearing again? She had lost the road in full daylight; now it was dark. Hope sat on the stump, more miserable than ever, not knowing what to do. The wood was absolutely silent, without the sound of crickets, or wind, or night birds. Hope felt very alone.



“Nisse evening, issn’t it?”
In the silence, the low voice made Hope jump and utter a little cry of fright.

“Who’s there?” She looked around rapidly, trying to find the speaker.



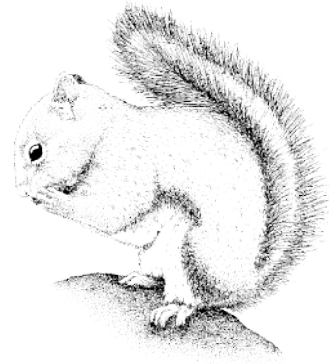
“My, but you’re jumpy. I was only making sssmall talk. I assumed you had crawled up there to take in the night air.”

Hope followed the sound of the lisping voice until she could see its owner, a light green snake coiled on a flat rock at the base of the stump. “I thought I was here alone,” she said. “That’s why I was frightened. It was so quiet.”

“Yesss, it isss peaceful, issn’t it? I often come here in the evening. But I’m sssurprised that you would think you were alone. There aren’t many places where you’re ever alone.”

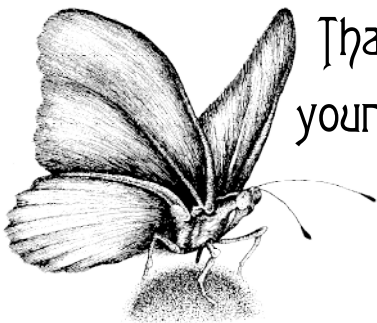
Hope looked at the snake, who was staring thoughtfully at her. “I’ve been lost and alone in The Forest all day and night,” she said. “Except for an owl

and a fox, and now you, I haven't met another living creature. I've been wandering around for ages trying to find the road so I can go home, and now it's dark, and I don't know if I'll ever find my way out. No one seems to be able to help me, and I know my mother must be terribly worried." She could not keep her voice from shaking, although she managed not to begin sobbing.



"I've ssseen the fox and the owl today myself," lisped the snake, "although I prefer to avoid the latter; we're not on the best of termsss, you know. But there are lots of others about, too—mice and squirrels and birds, and toads and insects galore, and sssnakesss, too, by the by. And of course there are the trees. There are forest folk everywhere you look, each keeping house in his own way. No, you're never alone in The Forest.

That's one of the besst things about having your home here."

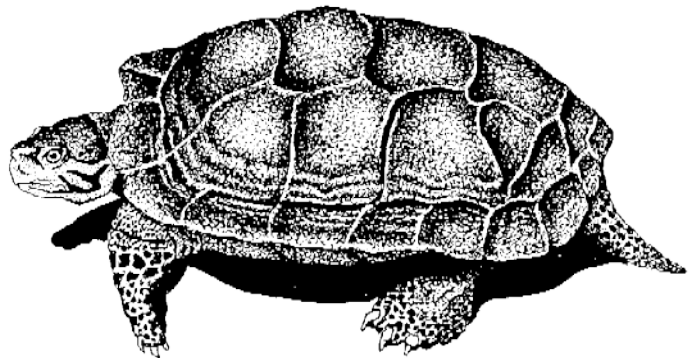




As she listened to the snake, Hope thought about all the living things around her. She had always known The Forest as a dangerous place, a place to be avoided. It never occurred to her that for many other creatures, it was home: a safe and friendly place. She began to feel a little better until she began to think about her own home.

“Perhaps you’re right,” replied Hope, “but still, The Forest is not my home. I can’t very well crawl under a rock and go to sleep. I need to find my own little cottage, at the end of the Forest Road. We must be close to the road now. Can’t you help me to find it?” She leaned forward and looked at the snake expectantly.

“I’d take you there myself, but it’s a long crawl for me. I generally try to avoid the road-carts and wagons are quite a hazard for my kind, you know.”



Hope's face fell, and she slumped back on the stump.
“But,” the snake continued, and she looked up sharply.
“I think I can help you find the way. I'm alwaysss glad
to help a fellow creature on her way.”





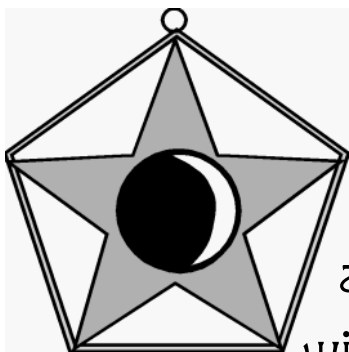
It is amazing and wonderful that you should come to this very place at this very time. It sssso happens that the sstump of the ancient plane tree on which you are sssitting holds a secret. There is a hidden compartment that contains an amulet, a charm that might help you to find your home."

"You mean a magic charm?" Hope asked, her eyes growing wider.

"Who can tell? I only know what all of my kind have always known: that the amulet is there, and that it waits for sssomeone who is truly in need of its help. I believe that that would be you." With these words the snake touched a small stub of a branch on the side of the tree stump. "Pull this branch: I'd do it myssself but, as you may have noticed, I do not have any hands free."

Smiling, Hope reached down and pulled the branch.

A compartment slid silently from the side of the stump, although she had seen no trace of it before. Hesitatingly, she put her hand into the compartment and withdrew the amulet. It was a smooth disk, made of several different woods which Hope did not recognize, and attached to a silver chain. On it was the image of a moon set in the outline of a star. As she gazed at it, Hope was startled to see it glow in her hand; then she realized that the real moon had risen above the tree-tops and its beams were reflecting off the polished wood.



“Usse the amulet to clear you mind and focus your thoughtsss,” whispered the snake. “Let your fear and worry ssslip away and the answer will come to you. You will be...illuminated!”

Hope sat on the stump with her eyes closed, the amulet clutched tightly in her small hands, and tried to clear her mind. She expected to feel the magic tingling

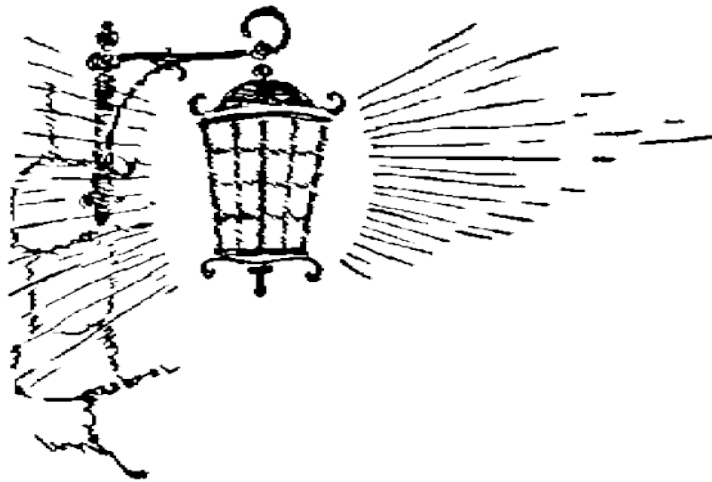
against her skin, but everything remained as it had been. After a while she began to feel disappointed and a little silly. She opened her eyes and stared above the tree tops at the moon rising in front of her. She thought to herself: "The moon looks just as it does from my own little window of my own little house. How I wish I were there!"

Suddenly she sat up straight. "The moon looks the same! I must be facing the same way! Let's see...I went into the woods—it seems like years ago!—on the same side of the road as my house." She turned excitedly to the snake. "That means the road is that way! The moon is showing me the way! The amulet is magic!"



The snake smiled again. "Concentrating on the charm helped you to clear your head. You figured out

the answer. The magic, if there is any, isss in you.
Take the amulet with you and keep it always. When
you are troubled or afraid, hold it in your hand and think
of this time and of me, and you will know what to do.
Now go, and hurry! Your mother awaitsss you.”



Thanking the snake profusely, Hope hurried off through The Forest in the direction of the rising moon. She had not gone very far at all before she spied a lighter area ahead. This time it really was the Forest Road. Almost giggling with relief, she stepped out onto the surface of the road and immediately looked to her right. Off in the distance, she could see a warm yellow light: the shining lamps of a house. Her house! All this time, she had been so close without even knowing it! Her heart leaping for joy, Hope began to run in the direction of the little cottage. As she came up to the white gate, the front door swung open and there, bathed in the golden glow of the lamplight, stood her mother with arms outstretched.



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